

Title	Analysis of the Relationship between Katsuhiro Yamaguchi' s Art and Commercial Interior Design of the 1960s
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Citation	デザイン理論. 76 p.87-p.98
Issue Date	2020-07-31
oaire:version	VoR
URL	https://doi.org/10.18910/76927
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Analysis of the Relationship between Katsuhiro Yamaguchi's Art and Commercial Interior Design of the 1960s

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Keywords

Katsuhiro Yamaguchi, interior design, interior object, Takamitsu Azuma

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1. Introduction

Katsuhiro Yamaguchi (1928–2018) is an influential figure in Japanese postwar avant-garde art. As an artist creating works with light and electronics, he became a pioneer of media art in Japan and, his works developed into something beyond the boundaries of fine art as typified by environmental art and design.

Yamaguchi was also interested in commercial interior design since he saw a significant interaction between art and design in avant-garde commercial interiors of the 1960s such as Kisho Kurokawa's Space Capsule (Tokyo, 1968) and Shiro Kuramata's Club Judd (Tokyo, 1969). He soon became acquainted with interior designers and architects and contributed critical essays on commercial interior design to the leading design magazines such as *Japan Interior Design*, *Shoten kenchiku* and *Design*. He also designed several commercial interiors including the club Fontaine (Tokyo, 1966, refurbished in 1969).

The purpose of this paper is to examine the relationship between Yamaguchi's art and Japanese commercial interior designs of the 1960s. As an artist and theorist, Yamaguchi became a mentor to avant-garde interior designers and architects, supporting their ideas of unifying art and interior design during the 1960s and 1970s. The interior designers and architects were particularly inspired by Yamaguchi's unique approach to space, in which his art objects dominated the space. The fundamental idea behind the approach was that Yamaguchi regarded his sculptural works as an "environment," rather than "objects".

This paper, therefore, looks at Yamaguchi's sculpture works of "vitrine," "stretched-cloth" and "light sculpture," and analyze how these art works were related to the interior designs made by Yamaguchi or other designers in the 1960s and early 1970s. Since Yamaguchi's contribution to commercial interior design has not been examined so far, the analysis is based on writings by Yamaguchi and his fellow artists.

2. The Relationship between Yamaguchi's Art and Commercial Interior Design

2.1. The *Vitrine* Series and Interior Design

Katsuhiro Yamaguchi was born in Oimachi, Tokyo in 1928. One of his earliest childhood memories is seeing a zeppelin flying through the skies over Oimachi. He developed an interest in airplanes and ships through foreign books that he received from his father. In 1945, at the age of 17, he attended a preparatory course to enter the Department of Technology at Nihon University.

Although he studied law at Nihon University, he formed an art group called Jikken Kobo (Experimental Workshop) with a number of artists, musicians, and poets in 1951. The group's name was coined by the Surrealist art critic Shuzo Takiguchi. Its members included fine artists such as Shozo Kitadai and Hideko Fukushima, and composers like Joji Yuasa and Toru Takemitsu. They presented their own works and also accepted commissions to create things like stage designs for ballets and vaudeville shows, and movies. Jikken Kobo remained active until 1957.

In the 1950s, Yamaguchi began to make art works using glass. After reading László Moholy-Nagy's book *Vision in Motion* (1947) and György Kepes' *Language of Vision* (1944), he became interested in using industrial materials including glass to make art. His glass works were part of a series called *Vitrine*, another term derived from Takiguchi. The typical vitrine was a box-shaped object containing a piece of painted glass inside and covered with a sheet of figured glass as seen in *Vitrine No. 37* (1953) [Fig. 1]. The optical effects of the figured glass caused images painted on the glass inside the box to look distorted.

Yamaguchi also used the vitrine as a decorative motif for one of his interior designs. In 1958, he was commissioned to design the interior of an apartment on the 6th floor of a building located on a high hill in Azabu, Tokyo¹ [Fig. 2]. Unlike a detached house with a garden view, the apartment was enclosed by concrete walls. Yamaguchi thought in such an environment people became increasingly conscious of interior details such as the size of doors, the shapes of doorknobs, and

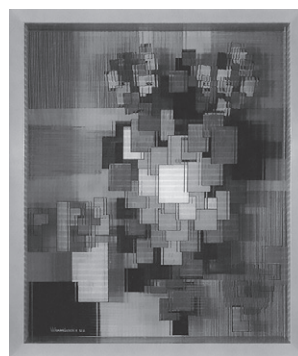


Fig. 1 Katsuhiro Yamaguchi, *Vitrine No. 37*, 1953, Oil, glass, plywood, Museum of Modern Art, Kamakura & Hayama

the design of radiators. He decided that these details should be decorative rather than ascetically sound². He used the vitrines to decorate the top of the low table and cover the radiator. The vitrines soon became “objects” that dominated the atmosphere. Soon after, Yamaguchi began to call them as “interior objects” and considered them to be a key part of his interior design.

2.2. “Stretched-Cloth” Sculptures and Interior Design

Yamaguchi continued the *Vitrine* series till 1958. After making wire-mesh sculptures for a short period, in October 1961 he embarked on a three-month trip to Europe and North America. During the trip, he grew tired of traditional European classic art, but developed an interest in non-traditional art such as happenings and art events, which were emerging in New York³. By the time he returned to Japan, Yamaguchi was no longer interested in designing forms and instead came up with the idea of “wrapping a void.” In 1976, Yamaguchi recalled this period:

I was fed up with designing forms, so I began to think about how to wrap or pack a void...

The work I created was like a skin. It had no back, nothing substantial. When I hung it on the wall, the wall was no longer part of the building anymore. What used to be a wall looked like a space that had grown out of the void in the work⁴.

This is Yamaguchi’s first “stretched-cloth” sculpture called *Kaze no hitsugi* (Coffin for the Wind, 1961) [Fig. 3]. It has a steel frame covered with torn pieces of canvas for flour and sugar bags. In 1981, Yamaguchi discussed how a stretched-cloth sculpture could alter the wall:

I often hang my stretched-cloth sculptures on the wall because they transform a neutral walled space into an art space⁵.



Fig. 2 Interior design by Katsuhiro Yamaguchi for the apartment, Azabu, Tokyo, 1958



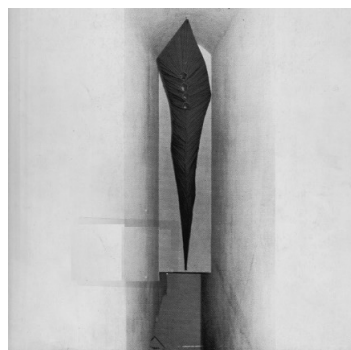
Fig. 3 Katsuhiro Yamaguchi, *Kaze no hitsugi*, 1961, Metal, cloth, Kawamura Memorial Museum of Art

From this comment, it is apparent that Yamaguchi regarded the sculptures as objects that dominated a space in the same way as his vitrine did. Unlike the vitrines, however, the concept of the stretched-cloth sculpture was shared by other artists and architects. For example, the architect Takamitsu Azuma used a huge stretched-cloth sculpture to decorate the interior of the Check pub in Shinjuku, Tokyo, in 1964 [Figs. 4–5]. According to another architect, Toshio Mitsufuji, Azuma said:

I had a chance to see Yamaguchi’s stretched-cloth sculptures in his studio, and hung one of them casually in the long, narrow stairwell to the basement, which I completely painted white. I was struck by the sculpture’s powerful ability to dominate the space, but at the same time I had fully expected it⁶.



Left: Fig. 4 Interior design by Takamitsu Azuma for the Check pub, Shinjuku, Tokyo, 1964



Right: Fig. 5 Yamaguchi's stretched-cloth object displayed in the Check pub

Azuma called the object a “space-generator” – apparently a synonym for Yamaguchi’s “interior object” – but explained the idea that a space grows out of an object more clearly than Yamaguchi did. These ideas had their roots in action painting of the 1950s. But action paintings dominated a space in a different way from Yamaguchi’s interior objects. The former physically dominates the surrounding space with its huge, wall-like canvas, whereas the latter never actually covers the space but dominates it by transforming it into something different from what it used to be. In other words, the stretched-cloth sculpture transformed a neutral walled space into an art space.

Yamaguchi found such transformative power in the works of his contemporaries such as Minami Tada, Michio Ihara and Takamichi Ito, all of whom made chandeliers, wall decorations, and objects for halls in office buildings or hotels. Yamaguchi recalled the year 1965 as follows:

In 1965, [due to Tada and Ihara’s impact], interior design gradually shifted from designing a space to

designing an interior object⁷.

The exact definition of Yamaguchi's term "interior object" remains unclear. From his own comments, it seems to mean an object that gives an impact on the interior space; or, as Yamaguchi said in 1966, "something that does not function as art or design." After this remark, he wrote, "Such things free us from desire⁸." Also, Yamaguchi probably saw Shiro Kuramata's 1975 shelf design in this light because he believed that they replaced normal utilitarian functionality with a "playful function⁹."

Despite Yamaguchi's efforts, the term "interior object" did not take hold. He was virtually the only person who ever used it and the term has now been forgotten, though *Japan Interior Design* magazine published an article titled "Fifteen Years of Interior Objects" in a special issue in 1975¹⁰. In fact, this reveal was not because the term or concept was well known, but because Yamaguchi served as one of the editors for the special issue.

2.3. Light Sculptures and Interior Design

Yamaguchi's belief that an object could dominate a space soon led to another idea: the concept of an "environment."

The term "environment" in relation to art seems to have first been used by Yamaguchi and the art critic Yoshiaki Tono around 1966. They argued that an environment differed from a space in that people are less involved in the latter. A space is an architectural construct enclosed by walls, ceilings and floors, whereas an environment is a space (*ba* in Japanese) or a specific spatial condition encircling people.

Yamaguchi began to consider environments seriously when he made his first light sculptures in 1964. The link between the two stemmed from the concept of interior objects. Yamaguchi sheds light on this in the following passage:

The work *Relation of C* (1965) [Fig. 6] was an extension of my stretched-cloth sculptures. Although they used different materials, they shared the fundamental concept of "wrapping." ... *Relation of C* is wrapped light¹¹.

Then I came to think that it was not a space, but an environment. The idea of environment made me think



Fig. 6 Katsuhiro Yamaguchi, *Relation of C*, 1965, Plastic, fluorescent lamps, metal, Museum of Contemporary Art, Tokyo

of the relationship between people and works or the distance between the two. The same thing could be said about primary structures, interiors, art galleries, or museums in that gigantic sculptures or objects stood in opposition to the space. This view would shock people, making them reconsider the essence of an interior or architectural space. Anyway, by thinking about these things, I gradually developed my concept of environment, which led to the creation of a kind of monument¹².

In 1966, two important exhibitions based on the concept of environment were held in Tokyo. One was *Color and Space* exhibition, held at Minami Gallery in Ginza from September to October, and the other was *From Space to Environment* exhibition held at Matsuya Department Store in Ginza in November [Fig. 7].

The first was curated by Yoshiaki Tono. After seeing primary sculptures in the U.S., Tono noticed some Japanese artists working in a similar style, so he organized a show featuring eight of them and focusing on new aspects of sculpture, such as coloring and mass production. The artists included Arata Isozaki, Tomio Miki, Shintaro Tanaka, and Yamaguchi, who showed a piece similar to *Port No. 2* (1967), one of his light sculpture series. He lauded the exhibition, saying, “[It] proved that very bright colors are powerful enough to create an environment¹³.”

From Space to Environment was curated by an executive committee as a prelude to the 1970 World Expo in Osaka. Yamaguchi was both a committee member and a participant in the exhibition. At the suggestion of Isozaki (also a committee member and a participant), 38 artists from a variety of fields, including art, design, architecture, music, and criticism, exhibited their works in a large room without any partitions. As a result, the exhibition seemed to destroy genres, which was exactly what the committee had set out to do. According to Yamaguchi, there were no rules about how to display anything – an attempt to create an “*informel*” state¹⁴.

Visitors were also allowed to touch many of the exhibits. The participatory concept showed that the exhibition attempted to create an environment rather than a space in which people could be involved.

Shigeru Uchida noted that *From Space to Environment* exhibition greatly stimulated interior designers because it presented the potential for developing individual artistic endeavors into environments for many people¹⁵. Although Uchida did not say any more, one can imagine that the participatory displays sparked

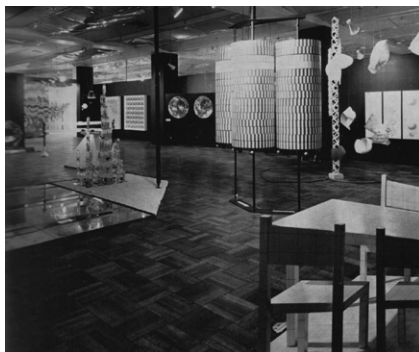


Fig.7 *From Space to Environment* exhibition, Matsuya Department Store, Ginza, Tokyo, 1966

new ideas for commercial interiors.

Around the same time as these exhibitions, Yamaguchi designed a commercial interior in 1966. It was the club Fontaine in Ginza [Fig. 8] which had bright blue painted walls illuminated by indirect lighting. The blue color might have been inspired by *Color and Space* exhibition. Nevertheless, Yamaguchi said that he attempted to create an extraordinary space that was appropriate for drinking rather than an artistic environment¹⁶. Based on this, we can assume that Yamaguchi drew a sharp line between his art and his commercial interiors until at least 1966.



Fig. 8 Interior design by Katsuhiro Yamaguchi for the club Fontaine, Ginza, Tokyo, 1966

In fact, Yamaguchi's earlier commercial interior, which he designed in 1960, had reflected a similar attitude. His interior for the Spanish restaurant Barcelona in Gotanda, Tokyo, was based on his image of traditional European decoration reminding Romanesque church interior with velvet sofas. He thought this was suited to the restaurant's concept of offering what Japanese people would generally imagine as European interior decorations. At that point, he had never been to Europe, so he tried to imagine what it was like from books.

The club Fontaine also employed latticework with traditional arabesque patterns, which mitigated the tense atmosphere created by more abstract motifs like the blue walls. We can, therefore, assume that he did not attempt to apply the concept of environment to the commercial interior at the time – probably because he was still tied to more traditional images.

2.4. Supergraphics and Workshop OFF OFF

In 1969, Yamaguchi refurbished the club Fontaine. This time, he used supergraphics [Fig. 9]. Emerging around 1966, the supergraphics method involved applying large letters, images, and patterns to the exterior of a building. Thus, it was a way of applying primary sculpture to architecture. In this way, supergraphics could be seen as a way of generating a specific environment, which was exactly what Yamaguchi had in mind. The interior of the Fontaine bar was then devoid of traditional motifs such as arabesques; it consisted only of geometrical forms, most of which were painted in vivid colors.

Supergraphics is also an object-based idea, even when it is space-oriented. Indeed, Yamaguchi never looked at a space without considering objects in it. This is all the more apparent from Workshop OFF OFF, began in 1970. This was a workshop for designing interior objects run by Yamaguchi, Takayasu Ito,

and Morio Shinoda. Its showroom was located in the boutique Haute Couture Madame Yasuda in Shibuya, Tokyo, the interior of which was also designed by Yamaguchi in 1970 [Fig. 10].

About the showroom, Yamaguchi wrote that he first considered the arrangement of furniture and made a flow plan, then he designed the space. Through this experience, he arrived at the idea that designing an interior should start with objects and then move on to the space – rather than the other way around¹⁷. Here again, we can clearly see the idea of a space growing out of objects. In this case, each object is a gigantic work recalling a primary sculpture from the 1960s that naturally dominated a space.

3. Conclusion

In this paper, I attempt to show the relationship between Yamaguchi's art and Japanese commercial interior designs of the 1960s. Early on in the late 1950s, there seemed to be no relationship between the two. However, the concept of environment gradually drew them together. What lay at the root of this unity was the idea that an object could dominate a space. This was proved by the fact that Yamaguchi's objects, such as vitrines and light sculptures, dominated the interior design of apartments and bars. It seems that Yamaguchi applied the supergraphic method to commercial interiors with the same idea in mind. In this case, primary colors played a dominant role on the objects in the interior.

This idea appealed to architects and interior designers of the 1960s, such as Takamitsu Azuma, Takashi Sakaizawa, and Shiro Kuramata. Azuma commented:

To create a space, there is, of course, an architectural method starting with the design of structural elements like the floor, walls and ceiling. But there is another more powerful method. For example,

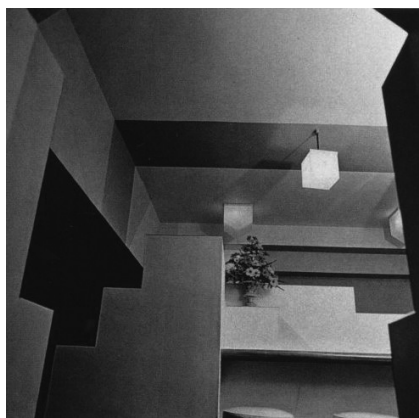


Fig. 9 Interior design by Katsuhiro Yamaguchi for the club Fontaine, Ginza, Tokyo, 1969



Fig. 10 Workshop OFF OFF in the Haute Couture Madame Yasuda, 1970, Shibuya, Tokyo

you can arrange objects inside a room and let them dominate the space. ... These days art is the new trend in interior design¹⁸.

The object-centered idea of interior design was also attempted by designers like Shiro Kuramata, who commented in 1977, “Why not make a space exclusively designed for one particular piece of furniture?”¹⁹ Kuramata began to design sculpture-like drawers using plastics and often let them dominate his commercial interiors in the 1960s and early 1970s. For example, for the boutique Capsule in the Seibu Department Store in Shibuya, Tokyo (1968), he designed a clear, acrylic display case shaped in a capsule and scattered many of them on the shop’s floor. In the case of the boutique Fashion In in Aoyama, Tokyo (1971) [Fig. 11], two clear acrylic display cases were placed in the center of the shop and the form of the cases clearly echoed that of the *Revolving Cabinet* [Fig. 12] designed by Kuramata in 1970. Sakaizawa’s well-known interiors also featured the objects; the café Knowledge (Hachioji, Tokyo, 1968) had a bicycle and umbrella bones both painted white and the jazz club Out Back (Kichioji, Tokyo, 1972) was accentuated by black-color stuffed birds.

Thus, the idea that the object dominates a space was welcomed by radical architects and interior designers of the era and reinterpreted as a way of unifying art and interior design. Based on Yamaguchi’s relationship with commercial interiors in the 1960s, we can assume that his influence was crucial in promoting this trend. He did this not only by practicing the unification of his art objects and commercial interiors, but also by writing articles and holding symposiums on interior design. Experimental commercial interior design as such developed only in Japan in the 1970s, and Katsuhiro Yamaguchi definitely contributed to its development as an artist working beyond genres.



Fig. 11 Interior design by Shiro Kuramata for the boutique Fashion In, 1971, Aoyama, Tokyo



Fig. 12 Shiro Kuramata, *Revolving Cabinet*, 1970, plastic, steel

Notes

(The English translations of the original Japanese titles were done by Keiko Hashimoto otherwise noted.)

- 1 Katsuhiko Yamaguchi, "Good design corner 7 Koso apāto: Yamaguchi Katsuhiko no shitsunaishoku D tei [A flat of a high-rise apartment house: interior design for D's residence by Katsuhiko Yamaguchi] ," *Geijutsu shincho*, July, 1958, pp.167-173.
- 2 Katsuhiko Yamaguchi, "Good design corner 7 Koso apāto," pp.167-173.
- 3 Katsuhiko Yamaguchi, Yoshiaki Tono, "Geijutsu to jikken no aida [Between art and experiments]," Yoshiaki Tono et.al. *Kisa Décor Seminar Series 4, Tono Yoshiaki taidanshu: dialogue 5*, Tokyo: Shinkenchikusha, 1977, p.26.
- 4 Katsuhiko Yamaguchi, Yoshiaki Tono, "Geijutsu to jikken no aida," p. 26. The quotation was translated from Japanese into English by Keiko Hashimoto.
- 5 *Japan Interior Design*, No. 266 (May, 1981), p.37. The quotation was translated from Japanese into English by Keiko Hashimoto. The original Japanese word for "art space" is "zokei kukan".
- 6 *Japan Interior Design*, No. 250 (January, 1980), p.46. The quotation was translated from Japanese into English by Keiko Hashimoto.
- 7 *Interior soka 15 shunen kinen 12 gatsu go zokan: gendai nihon no interior design 1960-1975* [Contemporary Japanese design 1960-1975], Tokyo: Interior shuppan kk., 1975, p.23. The quotation was translated from Japanese into English by Keiko Hashimoto.
- 8 Katsuhiko Yamaguchi, *Futeikei bijutsu ron* [Theories of art informel], Tokyo: Gakugeishorin, 1967, p.3. The quotation was translated from Japanese into English by Keiko Hashimoto.
- 9 *Kikan design*, No. 11 (Fall, 1975), p.78.
- 10 *Interior soka 15 shunen kinen 12 gatsu go zokan*, p.149.
- 11 Katsuhiko Yamaguchi, Yoshiaki Tono, "Geijutsu to jikkenn no aida," p.32. The quotation was translated from Japanese into English by Keiko Hashimoto.
- 12 Katsuhiko Yamaguchi, Yoshiaki Tono, "Geijutsu to jikkenn no aida," p.34. The quotation was translated from Japanese into English by Keiko Hashimoto.
- 13 *Interior soka 15 shunen kinen 12 gatsu go zokan*, p.24. The quotation was translated from Japanese into English by Keiko Hashimoto.
- 14 Katsuhiko Yamaguchi, *Futeikei bijutsu ron*, p.36.
- 15 Shigeru Uchida, "The Historical Development of Modern Interior Design through Meiji, Taisho, and Showa Periods," Shigeru Uchida, Kenji Oki, eds., *Nihon no interior Vol. 1: design no honryu* [the original English title: *Japan Interior Vol. 1: Design Currents*], Tokyo: Rokuyosha, 1994, p.29.
- 16 *Japan Interior Design*, No. 40 (July, 1966), p.83.
- 17 Katsuhiko Yamaguchi, "Haute Couture Madam Yasuda Workshop OFF OFF," *Shoten kenchiku*, Vol. 15, No. 12 (December, 1970), p.81.
- 18 *Interior soka 15 shunen kinen 12 gatsu go zokan*, p.90. The quotation was translated from Japanese into English by Keiko Hashimoto.
- 19 Shiro Kuramata, Masayuki Kurokawa, Takamichi Ito, "Design no nakade sozai wo do ikashite iruka [the role of material in design]," *Shoten kenchiku*, Vol. 22, No.3 (March, 1977 rinji zokan: Shoten kenchiku no sekkei gijutsu No. 3 [Special Issue: Commercial Architectural Design Techniques No. 3]), p.74. The quotation was translated from Japanese into English by Keiko Hashimoto.

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Figs. 8, 9: Kuniharu Sakumoto

Figs. 11, 12: Takayuki Ogawa Courtesy of Kuramata Design Office

The present article is based on the paper entitled “Katsuhiro Yamaguchi’s Influence on Commercial Interior Design of the 1960s” read at the 58th Conference of The Japan Society of Design held at Kyoto Seika University, Kyoto, 31 July, 2016.

I would like to express my sincere thanks to Katsuhiro Yamaguchi who was always willing to meet me and gave me valuable comments on my study. I pray for his happiness in the next life.

This work was supported by JSPS KAKENHI Grant Number 15K02127.

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Katsuhiro Yamaguchi (1928–2018) is an influential figure in Japanese avant-garde art of the late 1960s and early 1970s. As an artist creating works with light and electronics, Yamaguchi also designed several commercial interiors, including the club Fontaine (Tokyo, 1966, 1969). This paper discusses the relationship between Yamaguchi's art and Japanese commercial interior designs of the 1960s in order to analyze how Yamaguchi's art contributed to the world of interior design in this period.

To Yamaguchi, what lay at the root of the unity of art and interior was the idea that an object dominated a space. His objects, such as vitrines and light sculptures, dominated the interior design of apartments and bars. Yamaguchi's idea was accepted by radical architects and interior designers of the era. Such experimental commercial interior design was developed only in Japan in the 1970s, and Katsuhiro Yamaguchi definitely contributed to its development as an artist working beyond genres.